

Dance Department History Project 2010-2011

Transcribed interview of Shani Robison on November 29, 2010

Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis

I'm Shani Olson Robison. I'm currently an assistant professor in the department of dance and am going through my six-year review, so hopefully next year at this time, I will be an associate professor and will have the continuing status process.

For my undergraduate education, I attended BYU. But it was in 1990 that I was deciding whether or not to attend BYU or the U of U. I had auditioned at both and had received a better offer at the University of Utah from the ballet department there. They offered me full tuition, plus room and board for four years, plus tuition fees, books, and everything. I auditioned at BYU and they offered me a half-tuition scholarship with none of the other things.

It was a difficult decision because financially it made more sense to go to the University of Utah and in fact I talked to Bené Arnold, who is currently interim chair of the ballet department right now. At that time, though, she was one of the faculty members, and she called me at home trying to encourage me to go to Utah instead of BYU, because she knew that was a big decision of mine. She actually said I would make the biggest mistake of my life if I were to go to BYU. I made it a matter of prayer and it took a lot of time to make that decision because I knew it would affect me down the road in many different ways.

Eventually, I had to tell Bené, "I'm sorry, I have decided to attend BYU."

She was disappointed. I saw her for the first after that at a conference probably about six years ago. I went up to her and introduced myself, and she told me she knew who I was, and in fact watched performances at BYU to see how I was doing. I asked her if she had forgiven me yet, and she said she had. That chapter was closed at that point. She had noticed as she came to performances how much progress I was making and that I had made the right choice. I was glad to have her support me in the end.

Deciding to attend BYU was the best decision I have made because it has taken me on a journey I could have only dreamed of. As I said, I began my freshman year in 1990, when Phyllis Jacobsen was still chair. At that time, dance was still under PE—Dance in the catalog, so we didn't have a separate department just yet. During my time as an undergrad, we established ourselves as the dance department, which was nice. It was great to register for classes under Dance instead of under PE.

Phyllis was always so kind to me and I appreciated her support. Upon her retirement, I choreographed a solo for her, which involved finding her favorite piece of music, which was from a remote place in Canada. I was able to locate the music, choreograph it, and perform it at her retirement performance, which was really great for me. She went on tour with me in 1993 when Dancer's Company and Theatre Ballet went on that international tour together. I was always so impressed with her vigor and her non-stop drive; she would always be exercising on the side while we were getting ready, or encouraging us or just supporting us in any way that she could. It was really a great time and a great relationship that I had with her.

During my undergraduate years from 1990-1995, I had the following professors: Cathy Black, Marilyn Berrett, Pam Musil, Kathy Debenham, Pat Debenham, Mark Lanham, E.E. Chang, Sandra Allen, Connie Burton, Marianne Hatten, Sara Lee Gibb, Chris Ollerton, Marci Edgington, Claudia Hill and Kim Lanham.

During those years, I performed four out of my five years with Theatre Ballet as the principal dancer. I was able to do roles such as Black Swan, White Swan, and many other leading roles including a part that was created for me by Mark Lanham; I performed with Andrew Beign in that. It was such a great experience. I had great roles and great performing experiences. Theatre Ballet went on their only international tour in 1993 to South Africa. Other than that, we toured in the Western United States, which was also great. I really looked forward to that international tour and it made a big impact. I was able to teach a master class at the University of Capetown in South Africa. It was so well received and I gained a lot of confidence in my teaching at that point as an undergraduate student. I knew hopefully

someday I would have teaching be a part of my career.

Following my undergrad years, I decided to attend BYU for my master's degree. I really am so grateful that I did. At that time, it was a master of arts, and we currently don't offer it anymore. I found out after the first year that I really needed an MFA instead of a master of arts in order to have a terminal degree and teach at the university level. I contacted the University of Utah since they were the closest graduate program and they said I would need to start over. They told me all the courses I had finished over the entire coursework for my MA would have to be redone. I thought that was fine and decided to continue my master's here and do my thesis here. I didn't feel like transferring was the right move at that time. I finished my degree in 1999. It took me four years because a lot of life things were happening at that time as well.

I did my thesis on dance and choreography on merging in flamenco dance and ballet. I created an original work and then also published a lengthy thesis on the merging of the two styles, their history, and how they complement each other and how it was possible to do so. I was grateful in the long run that I received my master's at BYU because it merged the spiritual and the secular in such a beautiful way and it strengthened my testimony not only of the gospel, but of the power of dance.

I started teaching at BYU in 1993 as an undergrad student, Sandy asked me to teach. A couple of 190 classes, and as I became a graduate student in 1995, I continued teaching and they gave me quite a few classes and I really enjoyed that time teaching as a student. At the end of my graduate degree in 1999, I applied for a part-time teaching position and also let Sara Lee Gibb, who was department chair, and Sandy, who was division administrator of ballet, know that I would be interested in directing the Youth Artist Program.

They gave that position to me as well as offered me to teach a couple of 190 classes. I had actually been teaching more classes as a student and at higher levels than beginning ballet. I thought this would be a door I needed to go through to prove I was willing to start at whatever level and teach whatever classes, and hopefully things would progress from there. In those years from 2000 to 2001, things definitely progressed. Classes were added to my schedule quickly, and, as I said, I began directing the Youth Artist Program and things really started to open up.

In 2001, we decided to do away with the Youth Artist Program and develop a second university ballet company. We felt there were only a select able to perform with Theatre Ballet, we felt we needed to offer a second company. The other divisions had already established that and had quite a few second teams or teams underneath the top team. We felt this was a good move. We disbanded the Youth Artist Program, feeling like there was plenty of opportunity for the youth to train in the community and needing more opportunities for our students. After I was asked to direct that, I was part-time at the time, and it was definitely an extra load, but I was so excited to do that because that was my ultimate dream: to direct a university ballet company.

I remember sitting in the first rehearsal with those students and I am setting my first work on them, and I was just so grateful. I teared up and became emotional because I knew this was a dream come true. These students were here and I was directing them, and I was in charge of everything in that company. The company really grew from 2001 to 2006. The time that I directed it was phenomenal growth. In fact, in 2006, we performed an African piece in Ballet in Concert. That was the first time Ballet Showcase Company had been invited to perform with Theatre Ballet. I received the reviews that Ballet Showcase looked a lot stronger than Theatre Ballet. That was thrilling to me that this company was able to grow to such a level that we were doing main stage performances. I was thrilled with that and that opportunity.

Although Ballet Showcase Company was the second company in a lower level, I was thrilled with growing those little flowers in my own garden. I was very happy there because I felt like I could develop those dancers to go from there and many of them did perform in Theatre Ballet and went on to different careers. I really felt like that group, in fact most of those dancers stayed with me for four years straight, which was phenomenal. We were able to develop it into something fabulous and I was really excited.

At the end of Winter 2006, I had my twin boys, and that kind of changed things because I took a maternity leave and was not able to direct the company the next year, which stopped the consistency I felt

was important with that company. I took the maternity leave that year and returned in Fall 2006. I came back to teach the advanced levels in Winter 2007 to ease back into things. Of course, I couldn't take over the company halfway through the year, again.

What was interesting was in the middle of that, at the end of 2003, Jenny Prier, director of Theatre Ballet and a full-time faculty, resigned.

Lee Wakefield, who was department chair at the time, called me and said, "We need you to fill this full-time position right away, today."

I was quite shocked although I knew Jenny had other ambitions and she wasn't loving her experience in higher education. She wanted to do her own studio, but I thought she would stay at least during her six-year review, but it wasn't the case. I came on as full-time faculty in January 2004. They gave me a half a year appointment, and then they extended it another year after being hired officially in September 2004 as full-time faculty and assistant professor. There was a little bit interim time that I had to fill in. I had to work with companies, but it was really a time of change and growth for me because I really had to step up and experience new things.

In fall 2007, Jan Dijkwel, who stayed on after Jenny left, resigned. He was the full director of Theatre Ballet for a few years. He was excused from the university. We had started rehearsals in Fall 2007, and I had already set a complete piece in Ballet Showcase because I was becoming director again and everything was moving forward. Then I get the call to be director of Theatre Ballet because of the situation. I actually turned Sandy down and told her I was really happy with directing Ballet Showcase Company and moving forward again. I asked her if she could find someone else.

I was the only other full-time person, so she told me to think about it and told me they'd try to figure something out. I went to my husband, Ryan, and said I was asked to be the director of Theatre Ballet. We had two weeks until World of Dance and I had not even thought of directing that company, so I had a year plan for Ballet Showcase, but I didn't have any plans for Theatre Ballet.

I told him, "I don't even know what I would set on them to perform in World of Dance."

He said I was crazy and told me I had to direct that company. It was a window opening for me to take advantage of the opportunity.

After I thought and prayed about it, I told them I would do it.

The problem was this was a lot more time-intensive compared to Ballet Showcase, and with my twins only being a year and a half, I knew I would have a definite challenge on my hands. But, I moved forward; I jumped into place. The company wasn't sure what they were doing and I just started setting pieces on them. My goal was to really change the look of Theatre Ballet—to strengthen the company to a ballet company that was doing exciting things and really reaching out to the audience in a way so that people weren't groaning when ballet came onstage.

We wanted them to think that ballet was fun, exciting, and cutting edge, and that these students could showcase that and feel good about their art form. That has been my main goal since Fall 2007. I'm in my fourth year directing the company and it has been a challenging experience because these students are a different breed than Ballet Showcase Company, who are excited to perform. Theatre Ballet performers are very skilled, coming from professional backgrounds so they expect a lot and they have high expectations of what they will receive.

Balancing the students' needs and wants, and moving the program forward with vision, has been my main goal these past four years, and I think we have accomplished a lot. We have changed the touring program to Fairy Tales and Fantasy: that's a repertory show of classical works and this has changed ballet's touring. Previously, before I became director, Theatre Ballet could rarely get shows. They were looking at their touring program as fizzling out and that it possibly wouldn't continue.

I looked at International Folk Dancers and Ballroom and said, "They are doing a rep show. We can do a rep show, we just need a theme."

That is how I came up with the Fairy Tales and Fantasy, pulling from our classical repertoire of hundreds of years, why not use that to educate and bring in audiences with a prince and princess theme.

The past three years have been phenomenal. We have made a lot of money, we are booking shows years in advance. It is truly exciting. In fact this last year, we added the prince and princess party. It

has taken off like crazy. The little girls love to come dressed up and meet the dancers; they know the dancers, and they are quiet during the entire production. In fact, the presenters can't believe how many children sit still for an hour and a half because they have a connection and are so excited to be there.

I am thrilled the touring program has now changed and is evolving into something wonderful. Theatre Ballet is getting the recognition I feel they deserve and the excitement. The dancers are feeling it and showing it. In that company, we alternate contemporary shows with classical shows. This year, we are doing a full-length Cinderella performing with the BYU Philharmonic Orchestra, which hasn't been done since the 1980s as a full-length performance. I'm really trying to do collaborative efforts, to reach out to those in the college, now that we are in the Fine Arts, and grow this program. I also brought in professional guest artists: Amanda McCarrow and John Gardner from American Ballet Theatre. They coach the dancers two years in a row, setting tutoring rows with them, which has been fabulous.

I'm bringing in other guest artists to help with contemporary works next year. I'm trying to open up the scope of this program and I have a great vision for this ballet program. It has been a great launching pad for new and exciting things in the ballet division.

This past year, I've been asked to be the ballet division administrator, so I have two huge loads besides developing the Theatre Ballet program. I also am now the ballet division administrator, after Sandy has completed thirty somewhat years in that position. I have huge shoes to fill, but I am trying my best and I've really pulled the faculty together to have a vision and to move forward with great things in the future so we can continue to improve here at BYU. I've taught here since 1993 in all levels of ballet and have enjoyed everything—the 190 classes to the Theatre Ballet Company to the top level. I am so grateful for this opportunity that I have had to grow as a teacher and as an artist—from all the faculty members that have been here before me that have mentored and supported me to find that confidence in myself to move forward in such a bold way. I am so grateful to be at BYU, that I was educated at BYU, and that I can move forward from here.